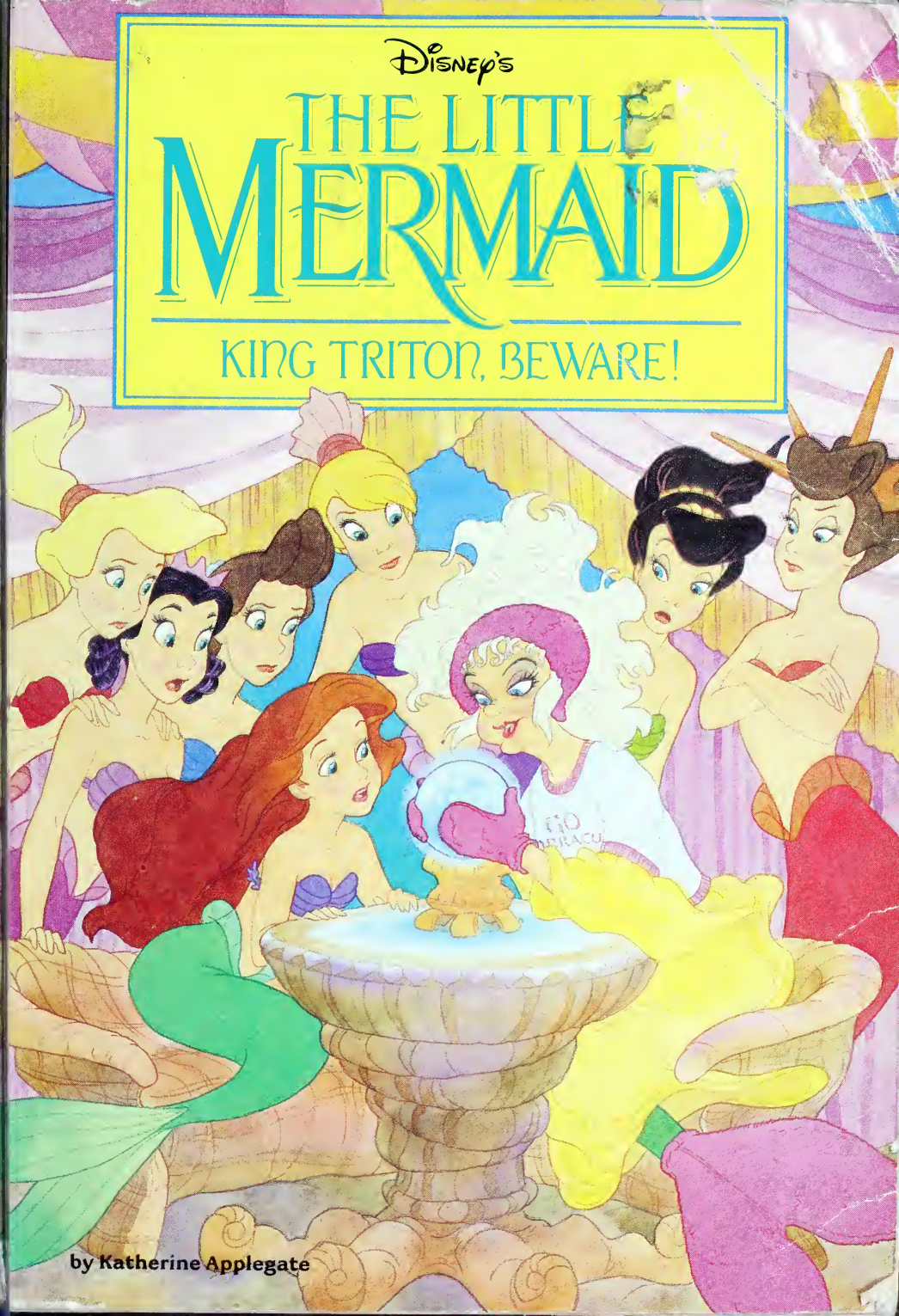
Disney's
THE LITTLE MERMAID
KING TRITON, BEWARE!
by Katherine Applegate

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KING TRITON, BEWARE!

by Katherine Applegate

NEW YORK

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THE LITTLE MERMAID

KING TRITON, BEWARE!

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1

The colorful posters were plastered all across King Triton's undersea kingdom:

Come One, Come All,
and Don't Delay!
The Circus Starts on Saturday!

Ariel, the youngest of the King's seven daughters, paused in front of one of the signs on her way home from school. "I'm

going to see the circus," she announced to her sisters, her large blue-green eyes shining.

"Of course you are," said Aquata, her oldest sister. "We all are. The opening performance is in Father's honor."

"No, I mean I'm going to see it *now*," Ariel said with a mischievous smile.

"But the circus just arrived yesterday," Arista pointed out. "They're still setting up and practicing."

Attina shifted her stack of schoolbooks from one arm to the other. "Besides," she added, "we should go straight home. We have a ton of sea-ography and eel-gebra homework."

Ariel gazed at the grinning clownfish on the poster. After being cooped up in school all day long, homework was the last thing she felt like doing.

"I'm just going to take a little detour on the way home," she said.

As Ariel sped off in a blur of bubbles, Arista looked at her other sisters and sighed. "So," she said, "which is it? The circus or homework?"

"Ariel's really a bad influence, you know," Aquata said. She was shaking her head and trying to hide a smile.

"Terrible," Andrina agreed with a laugh.

The six mermaids looked at each other. "Last one there is a rotten eel," Alana cried as they all went tearing after Ariel.

They caught up with her near a bank of seaweed. "What took you so long?" Ariel asked with a smile.

The princesses floated over a large pink coral ridge and found themselves overlooking a wide, flat expanse of sand. There several muscular squid wearing striped caps were raising a huge yellow tent. Several smaller tents had been set up already, and merpeople and other creatures were rushing around, getting the circus ready for business. A caravan of conch-shell coaches lined the outskirts of the grounds.

Aquata's eyes widened. "I haven't been to a circus since I was just a baby!"

"Look at the rides!" Andrina exclaimed. She pointed to a merman who was attaching basketlike clamshell seats to the arms

of a giant octopus. "That one looks like fun!"

"Come on," Ariel said, floating toward a row of small tents and booths. "Let's get a closer look."

A hammerhead shark was nailing a sign above the closest tent. "Sponge Toss," read Andrina.

Adella drifted over to a small orange-striped tent. "Spun sweet seaweed!" she cried, smacking her lips hungrily. "I love this stuff."

"Look over there," Aquata said excitedly. She pointed to a tent with the words Bass Bigmouth—Swordfish Swallower Extraordinaire written in bright red letters on the side. A young bass was floating near the entrance. He was dressed in a costume of silvery beads and holding a large swordfish in his right fin.

While the girls watched in amazement, the bass tilted back his head and placed the long, sharp snout of the swordfish in his large mouth. Then he calmly eased it down his throat.

The princesses applauded loudly. Bass Bigmouth pulled the swordfish out and took a long, deep bow. "Enough practice, already," the swordfish grumbled.

Ariel was still applauding when another sign caught her eye. The Magnificent Merseer, it said. See the Future or Your Money Back!

"Oh! I want to go see the fortune-teller on Saturday," she exclaimed.

"That's a waste of time," said Attina. "No one can see into the future."

Suddenly a little old merwoman appeared in the doorway of the fortune-teller's tent. Her white hair was piled high on her head. She was wearing a glamorous golden dress made of layers of shimmering fabric. But her bright red lipstick was a little smudged, and she was wearing a pair of fuzzy pink mittens, a pink ear warmer, and a matching fuzzy fin warmer. Over the dress she had on a T-shirt that read Go Barracudas.

"You needn't wait till Saturday, dear little princess, no indeedy," she said in a high-pitched wobbly voice that reminded Ariel of

the way her best friend, Flounder, sounded when he was nervous.

"Are you the Magnificent Merseer?" Ariel asked doubtfully.

"That's me," said the merwoman. "Come inside, won't you?"

"I don't think we'd better," Alana said nervously, tugging at Ariel's arm. "We really should be getting home."

Ariel hesitated. She didn't want to hurt the old merwoman's feelings. "Let's go," she said. "It'll be fun."

"All right. But only for a minute," Aquata decided.

"Wait," said Arista. "We shouldn't go in without Adella. Where is she? I don't see her anywhere."

Merseer pointed down the row of tents. "Try the House of Mirrors."

"It figures," Andrina said, laughing. "Adella never gets tired of admiring her own reflection."

"How do you know that's where she is?" Ariel asked the merwoman.

Merseer shrugged. "Actually, it's not all

that mysterious. I just happened to see her going in."

"I'll go get Adella," Attina volunteered. "But don't start without us."

"Come inside, Your Mightinesses," Merseer urged the others. "Let's see what the future holds."

Ariel and her sisters followed Merseer into the tiny tent. Sitting on a golden stand in the center of a round table was the largest pearl Ariel had ever seen.

"How exactly do you see the future?" Andrina asked, peering curiously at the giant pearl.

"Nothing to it, near as I can tell," the old merwoman said. "The regular fortune-teller left complete instructions."

"The *regular* fortune-teller?" Aquata echoed.

"I'm filling in for her temporarily." Merseer shook her head. "She was the victim of a little prank, you see. One of the clownfish put a spiny sea urchin on her chair, and now she's at Mersea Hospital with thirty-four stitches in her tail."

"That's too bad," said Andrina, trying not to laugh.

Merseer paused to examine the seat of her chair before sitting down. "Most of the time, I work for a circus in the Mediterranean, making costumes," she explained. "That's why I'm wearing these mittens. The water's too cold in these parts, if you ask me. I can barely get this old tail swishing in the morning."

Ariel noticed a thick book lying on the table beside the pearl. It was called *Tell the Future in Three Easy Lessons.* "Are you *sure* you know how to do this?" Ariel asked the old merwoman.

"Of course," Merseer assured her. "An incantation or two, and poof!"

"Poof?" Ariel repeated.

Just then Attina and Adella swam in. "Someone has got to complain to the management about those mirrors," Adella cried, patting her dark wavy hair. "One even made me look like I have a tail the size of a humpback whale!"

"They're *supposed* to distort your looks," Andrina said, laughing. "That's the whole point."

"Well, why would I want to distort my looks?" Adella demanded. "I look great just the way I am!"

"Let me see now," Merseer murmured, taking off her mittens and thumbing through her book. "Ah, here it is. 'Fortunes, royal.' "

Adella narrowed her eyes. "*She's* the fortune-teller?" she whispered to Ariel.

"She's just filling in," Ariel explained.

"Here we go," Merseer exclaimed. She put her mittens back on and clapped them together. Then she closed her eyes and placed her mittens on the pearl. Swaying back and forth in the water, shimmying and swirling her tail, she recited:

Rum-tum-tums and tic-tac-toes,
Tell us how the future goes.
La-dee-das and fiddle-dee-dees,
Reveal it now, oh, pretty please!

"Pretty please?" Attina whispered to Ariel doubtfully.

Suddenly Merseer's eyes flew open, and she stared deep into the pearl.

"What do you see?" Ariel asked in a hushed voice.

Merseer pursed her lips. "Hmm. A pearl, pretty much. A very big pearl."

"Told you so," Attina muttered.

"Wait a minute! Yes! I *do* see something," Merseer exclaimed, sounding a little surprised. "Hold on to your scales, majestic ones."

The princesses gathered around her as the pearl began to glow with an eerie blue light. "What do you see?" whispered Alana, wide-eyed.

"One of you," Merseer replied, swaying slightly. "One of you who is a beauty among beauties—"

"That must be me," Adella piped up, peering over Merseer's shoulder.

"Yes, indeed. Her name is . . . A . . . A-dull-one?"

Adella frowned at her giggling sisters. "A*della*," she corrected.

Merseer waved her mittened hand. "Whatever you say, dear." She squinted at the glowing pearl. "You will run into a handsome young man who will sweep you off your tail."

Adella's eyes went wide. "What does he look like? Where does he live? Details, Merseer! I need details!"

Merseer looked up. "Sorry. That's all I can tell you." She concentrated again. "Another one of you . . . one who loves books more than anything . . . A-teeny-one?"

"That must be you, Attina," Ariel said.

Merseer frowned. "Hmm. Well, this is rather disturbing."

"What do you see?" Ariel asked.

Merseer looked up at Attina. "The future is never crystal clear. All I can say is this—

the pursuit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing."

Attina frowned, looking confused. "What does *that* mean?"

"I haven't a clue. But it has kind of a nice ring to it, doesn't it?" Merseer said. She sat back in her chair and sighed. "Dear me, I'm growing weary. This is harder than it looks. And I'm afraid the pearl has nearly stopped glowing."

"Well, thank you very much for your time, Merseer," Ariel said politely. She couldn't help feeling a little disappointed that neither of the predictions had involved her.

"But my young man," Adella whined. "Where will I find him?"

"Perhaps he'll find you," Merseer said with a wink.

"Come on, Adella. Let's go," said Aquata.

But as the princesses started to leave, Merseer let out a cry. "The pearl!" she exclaimed. "It's going berserk!"

Ariel gasped. The pearl throbbed with a blinding blue light—so bright she had to shade her eyes.

Merseer put her mittens on the pearl again. "I . . . I've never seen it glow so brightly," she said. Suddenly she jumped back in shock. "Oh my, oh my! No, this can't be!" She shook her head so hard that her fuzzy pink ear warmer floated off.

"What?" Ariel asked. "What's wrong, Merseer?"

"I see danger!" Merseer cried. "Terrible danger!"

Ariel dashed back to the old merwoman's side. "Tell us, Merseer," she urged. "What exactly did you see in the pearl? Who's in danger?"

"Soon," Merseer whispered, her mittens trembling as they touched the pearl, "very soon indeed, the crown of the great King Triton will be toppled."

A hush fell over the princesses. "But what

does that mean?" Alana finally asked, her voice quavering.

"It means," Aquata said darkly, "that someone is going to try to overthrow Father and take over his kingdom."

"But who would do such a thing?" Arista demanded.

"And where will this happen?" Ariel asked anxiously. "Can you tell us anything more, Merseer?"

Merseer took a deep breath. She returned her gaze to the pearl. "I can't see much," she said. "But I can tell you it will be under the big top."

"You mean someone at the circus will try to harm Father?" Aquata asked.

Suddenly the pearl stopped glowing. "That's all I can see," Merseer said quietly. "I wish I could tell you more. But remember what I said before: The future is never crystal clear."

"This is crazy," Attina said. "Nothing personal, Merseer. I mean, you seem like a very nice lady, but I don't believe that anyone can see the future."

"Attina's right. This is all a silly waste of time," Aquata added. "There's no need for us to worry about Father."

"I know what I know, and I saw what I saw," Merseer insisted shakily. "And if you love your father, you'll watch out for him every second until the circus leaves the kingdom."

Andrina smiled. "Please don't worry anymore, Merseer. I'm sure everything will be okay."

Ariel hoped Andrina was right, but she wasn't so sure. She glanced at Merseer, whose face was as pale as her pearl. The old merwoman's mittened hands were still trembling. Whatever she'd seen, it had definitely scared her.

The girls began to swim out of the tent, but Adella paused at the door. "Do you really think I'm going to meet the boy of my dreams?" she asked hopefully.

Attina grabbed her sister's arm. "Come on, Adella."

Once she was outside, Ariel started to feel better. It was hard to worry about anything

while surrounded by the bright colors and sounds of the circus.

"Can you believe that old lady?" Aquata asked as the sisters drifted down the row of sideshow tents. "She actually thought she could see the future."

"Well, the pearl *was* glowing," Alana pointed out.

"And she seemed awfully frightened after she warned us about Father," Ariel added.

They passed the entrance to the House of Mirrors. A large curvy mirror sat beside the tent opening. "This is the mirror I told you about," Adella said, swimming toward it. "It makes me look ten feet wide."

As Adella twirled around in front of the mirror, a merboy swam out of the tent and started sweeping the sandy entranceway with a large broom.

"Adella, watch out," Arista cried, but it was too late. Adella swam smack into the merboy's broom. She landed on the seafloor, sending up a cloud of sand.

"Why don't you watch where you're—,"

Adella began. Suddenly her eyes went wide. She stared into the handsome merboy's brown eyes with a goofy grin.

"Forgive me, Princess," the merboy apologized as he helped Adella up. "I should have been paying more attention to where I was going. But I took one look at you, and—" His cheeks turned the color of coral.

"*I'm* the one who should have been watching where *I* was going," Adella said quickly, batting her long eyelashes.

Ariel and Aquata exchanged a glance. "Wonderful," Aquata muttered. "Adella's in love again. Now we'll never make it home in time for dinner."

"Come on, Adella," Andrina called. "We're already late."

Adella flashed the merboy a brilliant smile and reluctantly joined her sisters. "But he's so beautiful," she whispered with a sigh.

"There are plenty of fish in the sea," Andrina reminded her. "You can't fall for every boy you run into—" Suddenly she gasped.

Adella stopped. So did Ariel. So did

Aquata and Alana and Arista and Attina. They all looked at each other.

Ariel was the first to say it.

"You will run into a handsome young man who will sweep you off your tail," she whispered. "It's just like Merseer said. Her prediction came true!"

"Coincidence," Attina pronounced.

"He *was* awfully handsome," Adella argued.

"And he *did* sweep her off her tail," Ariel added. "Sort of."

The princesses slowly began swimming toward home. "When Merseer made her prediction, I doubt she meant that the boy would actually be carrying a broom," Aquata said.

"Still, she *was* right, more or less," Ariel

pointed out worriedly. "What if she's right about Father, too?"

For a moment all the princesses fell silent. Finally, Attina spoke. "Don't be silly, Ariel," she said. "Face it. Adella falls in love twice a day. The fact that she ran into that boy doesn't mean anything."

"Just for the record, *he* ran into *me*," Adella said. "And I do not fall in love twice a day." She paused. "Once a day, maybe."

The rest of the way home, the princesses were very quiet. When they neared the palace, Ariel paused. "Do you think we should tell Father about Merseer?" she asked. "Just to be on the safe side?"

"You know Father," Andrina replied. "He doesn't believe in that kind of thing at all. He'd probably just laugh at us."

The girls had just started through the palace gate when Attina let out a cry. "My sea-ography book!" She flipped through the pile of books in her arms. "It's gone. I must have dropped it on the way home."

"Don't worry," Aquata consoled her. "We'll go back and look for it right now."

The princesses began to retrace their path. They hadn't gone far when Attina pointed down at a field of kelp. "I see it," she said, sighing with relief. She flipped her tail and started to swim toward the book.

"I'm glad she found it," Andrina said. "You know Attina. She never would have given up looking."

Ariel smiled. "I guess at least one of us should be interested in pursuing . . . " She paused. What was it that Merseer had told Attina?

At that moment Ariel heard the whinnies of sea horses and a rush of water. Suddenly she remembered what Merseer had said. Ariel looked down at her sister, who had just reached her book. Attina didn't seem to hear anything. "Attina!" Ariel cried in terror. "Look out!"

Suddenly a stageconch came barreling around a corner. Its six sea horses were out of control and racing at full speed—straight toward Attina!

"Attina! Behind you!" Ariel cried even louder.

Attina barely had time to dart out of the path of the onrushing stageconch. It brushed past her, spinning her around like a small waterspout and then sending her tumbling to the ocean floor.

Her sisters rushed over to her. "Are you all right?" Ariel asked anxiously.

Attina lay near the kelp bed, her face pale. "You saved my life, Ariel," she gasped.

Andrina began retrieving Attina's scattered books. "That was a close one," she said. "And to think you almost lost your life over a lousy sea-ography book!"

"Wait a minute," Arista said suddenly. She looked over at Ariel. "You warned Attina even before that stageconch appeared."

"Don't you get it?" Ariel asked. "I saw Attina going after her book and I realized she was *pursuing knowledge.*"

"The pursuit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing," Alana whispered, repeating Merseer's warning.

"Exactly," Ariel said. She gulped past the lump in her throat. "Still think it's all just a coincidence?"

"Of course it's just a coincidence," Attina replied, although she didn't sound as certain as she had before.

"I don't know, Attina," Alana said. "It sure looks to me as though Merseer was right twice. Maybe we *should* tell Father about her prediction."

"We have to," Ariel said firmly.

"He'll never believe it," Andrina argued.

"I'm not even sure *I* believe it," Aquata added. "But Ariel's right. We should tell Father—just to be on the safe side."

When the princesses arrived at the palace, they found King Triton in the coral-lined library. He was sitting in his favorite rocker, thumbing through a pile of magazines—*Oceanweek, Current Events,* and *The Pacific.*

"There you are," he said as they entered. "I didn't see you come home from school. Where have you been all this time? Studying hard up in your bedchambers?"

"Not exactly," Ariel said, feeling a twinge of guilt.

Triton raised an eyebrow. "Not exactly studying hard?"

"Not exactly up in our bedchambers," Aquata admitted.

"But it's a good thing we weren't," Ariel added quickly. "We decided to stop by the circus on our way home from school, and—"

"The circus?" the King interrupted. "But the opening performance isn't until Saturday."

"We were just curious," Ariel said.

King Triton sighed. "Curiosity, my dear Ariel, is your middle name. Haven't we discussed your wandering off often enough? And dragging your sisters along—"

"She didn't drag us," Alana said. "We wanted to go. We saw a swordfish swallower—"

"And some really horrible mirrors," Adella added with a sniff.

"And a . . ." Ariel paused. "A fortune-teller."

"A fortune-teller, eh?" The King smiled. "It's a good thing my very sensible daughters don't believe in such things."

"Well, we *didn't,*" Ariel replied slowly. "Not at first."

"Not until everything she predicted came true," Alana added.

"And the worst part is, she said that something terrible was going to happen to you, Father," Ariel blurted out. "She said someone was going to try to take over your kingdom."

King Triton stroked his long white beard. "I see," he said, still smiling. "And how did she know this?"

"Well," Aquata explained, "she looked into this gigantic pearl that turned blue and glowed."

The King's smile grew broader. "Very interesting."

"And she recited a poem," Attina added.

"I don't suppose you remember it?" the King asked.

"It went, 'Tic-tac-toes and rum-tum-tums—,' " Ariel began.

"No," Arista said firmly. "The rum-tums came first, then the tic-tacs—"

Triton held up his hands. "I think I get the general idea. Now, I want you to put this silliness right out of your heads. No

more talk about the circus, or blue pearls, or tums and toes." He pointed to the stack of books Attina was carrying. "There's still time before dinner for you to get started on your homework."

"But Father," Ariel pressed. She couldn't give up now. It was too important. "Merseer was sure that something would happen to you at the circus. Couldn't you just skip the performance on Saturday?"

"Nonsense. That performance is in my honor. I wouldn't miss it for the whole sea."

"But Merseer was right about Adella and Attina today," Arista argued. "What if she's right about you, too?"

The King picked up one of his magazines. "If she's right, perhaps I'll give her a job. Having someone around who could see the future would make running my kingdom much easier."

"If she's right, you won't *have* a kingdom much longer," Ariel said under her breath as the princesses swam away.

* * *

"Maybe Father's right and there's nothing to worry about," Aquata said when they were in the hall.

"Is that really what you think?" Ariel asked.

"It's what I *hope*."

"But what if he's wrong and Merseer's right?" Ariel exclaimed. "We can't let him take that chance, can we?"

Aquata threw up her hands. "If he insists on going to the circus on Saturday, what can we do?"

Ariel shook her head. "I'm not sure," she said, "but somehow we've got to stop Merseer's prediction from coming true."

The next afternoon, the princesses swam straight to the circus after school. "Now, remember," Ariel reminded them as they headed into the big main tent. "Be on the lookout for anyone who seems suspicious. We don't have much time."

"You know," Arista pointed out, "Merseer just said that someone *at* the circus would try to harm Father. What if it's a member of the audience rather than a performer?"

Ariel paused. "I didn't think of that." She shrugged. "Well, I guess all we can do for now is watch the performers. If we don't find anyone suspicious, we'll have to keep an eye on the audience, too, on Saturday."

The mermaids swam quickly toward the center ring.

"Look at those beautiful sea horses," cried Arista as six sea horses galloped into the ring. A young merwoman was riding bareback on the first sea horse.

"Come on, Arista," Alana said, pulling on her arm. "We're not here to see the sea horses––even if they are gorgeous."

"*Or* to look for that handsome boy," Ariel added loudly.

Adella spun around, her cheeks turning lobster red. "Well, who knows *what* we're looking for?" she demanded.

"Do my eyes deceive me?" a voice boomed out from the back of the tent.

The mermaids turned. A large smiling tuna was swooping toward them. He was wearing a black top hat and a tuxedo. "King Triton's seven lovely daughters right here

under my humble big top!" he exclaimed. He took a low bow. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Al B. Core. Ringmaster extraordinaire, at your service. But please, just call me Al. To what do I owe this great honor? I didn't expect to see Your Highnesses until Saturday."

Ariel gave her sisters a warning look. She didn't want them blowing their cover by telling Al the real reason for their visit. Even he could be a suspect. "We're just here because . . . " She paused, trying to come up with a reasonable excuse. "Because, well, my sister Adella has always really wanted to be a clown," she blurted out.

"Ariel!" Adella cried indignantly. She shot her a look hot enough to boil the Arctic Ocean.

"No need to be embarrassed," Al assured Adella. "We all have a little bit of clown in us. Why, I once had a famous duchess clown for us between social seasons. Duchess Beauzeau, her name was."

Adella started to open her mouth, but Ariel jumped in quickly. "I don't suppose

you'd have time to give us a little tour?" she asked Al sweetly.

"Little tour? Why, I'll give you the grand royal tour!" the ringmaster exclaimed. "We'll start with the big top, then work our way over to the rides and the acts. Have you seen the House of Horrors yet? Wonderful great white shark there. Not real, of course, but those teeth will give you nightmares for a week."

"We'd like to meet as many of the performers as we can," said Andrina.

"Of course, of course," Al said with another bow.

Just then a small mergirl with a long blond ponytail and a dark frown came rushing toward them from across the ring. "Al!" she yelled. "Stay right there. I need to talk to you."

"Ah, we can start with Larinette," Al said. "She's the grand finale of our show. She waits inside a giant tube made of barnacles that is fitted over the blowhole of our humpback whale, Humphrey. When Humphrey blows, out Larinette flies. She

does a triple back somersault, then catches a trapeze carried by two speeding dolphins."

"Wow," Ariel said. "That must be dangerous."

"Well, it helps that old Humphrey has incredible aim," Al replied. "And he never misses a cue." The tuna nodded at Larinette as she approached. "In addition, of course," he added, "our wonderful little starlet Larinette is an amazing athlete. Why, she's the most daring performer in the sea, the—"

"Can it, Al," Larinette snapped, her hands on her hips. She blew a huge green bubble of sea gum, then popped it.

Al cleared his throat. "Perhaps you don't recognize our esteemed visitors," he said, nodding at the princesses. "King Triton's daughters—"

"I don't have time for small talk," Larinette said, swishing her tail impatiently. "I've got a flying fish to catch in half an hour."

"But—"

"I am outta here," Larinette continued. "Done. Finished. Byesville."

"What? But *why*?" Al cried.

"I got an acting job. It's in a play called *Clamlet*." She looked at the princesses. "You have to understand, the working conditions here are lousy. Night after night, flying out of that old whale's blowhole. I mean, I like Humphrey and all, but phew! His breath!"

"Larinette, you can't leave me like this," Al begged. "How will I ever replace you?"

Larinette blew another bubble and popped it with her finger. "You'll find somebody, Al," she said. She gave a little wave and swam off.

The ringmaster shook his head. "But it's such short notice," he moaned, wringing his fins. "Where will I ever find another Larinette at this late date? Someone beautiful and brave and crazy enough to take her place?"

Suddenly Ariel had a wonderful, terrible, very sneaky idea.

"I know where," she said.

"You know of another female daredevil?" Al asked hopefully.

"You're looking at her," Ariel said.

"Ariel—," Aquata began in a warning voice.

"But you're a princess!" the ringmaster sputtered. "King Triton would never allow—"

"It'll be a surprise for the big performance on Saturday!" Ariel exclaimed, ignoring

Aquata's glare. "In fact, if you could find parts for my sisters, I'm sure they'd love to perform in the show, too!" She waved her hand at the other mermaids, who were too shocked to respond for a moment.

"But this would be magnificent," Al cried. "A stellar performance for the King, featuring his very own daughters!" He shook his head as though he couldn't quite believe his luck.

"Ariel," Aquata said, gritting her teeth, "shouldn't we think this over first?"

Ariel was sure that working at the circus would be the perfect way to find out who was plotting to overthrow the King. "Think how much Father will appreciate this," she said to Aquata, giving her a meaningful look.

Aquata sighed. "All right then," she said, still looking a little doubtful. "For Father."

"Of course," Ariel added to Al, "you'll have to promise not to tell a soul about this. We want to surprise Father."

"Your wish is my command." Al rubbed his fins together excitedly. "Now, we'll have to find the perfect spot for each of you," he said. He gazed at the center ring, where the

sea horses were romping playfully. "Equinias could always use an extra hand with her sea horse act."

All eyes turned to Arista, who loved to ride. "I'll help," she volunteered quickly, looking excited.

"You must understand, these are not your typical sea horses," Al warned. "These are highly trained animals, and they can be a little temperamental."

"Arista can handle them," Ariel said confidently.

"Now, let me see," the ringmaster said, swimming back and forth distractedly, his brow furrowed. "What to do with the rest of you . . ."

While Al considered, Aquata pulled Ariel aside. "Are you *sure* this is a good idea?" Aquata asked.

"Can you think of a better way to find out who's behind the plot to overthrow Father?" Ariel whispered. "After all, we don't have much time."

"I've got it!" Al cried. "One of you can work with the acrobats."

"Andrina would be perfect for that," Attina said. "She's definitely the best athlete of all of us."

"Fine, fine," the ringmaster said. "You'll love the costumes," he added to Andrina.

He began swimming again, stroking his chin. "We could always use more help with the trained dogfish act," he said.

"How about Alana?" Ariel suggested. "She's good with all kinds of creatures."

"Wonderful," said Al. "Now, the Mysterious Manta, our magician, could use an extra assistant. Someone who can think quickly on her fins."

"That sounds interesting," Attina volunteered. "I'd like to see how he does his tricks."

"Better yet, you'll *help* him do them," Al replied. "You don't mind being sawed in half, do you? We used to take volunteers from the audience until that time when Chaney, Manta's sawfish, slipped—"

"His sawfish slipped?" Attina demanded.

"Nothing to worry about, I assure you," Al said. "Chaney was just a little careless. It

won't happen again. You think I'd let anything happen to one of the King's daughters?" He looked the princesses over. "Now, who's left? Come on, don't clam up. There's room for all of you under the big top."

Adella and Aquata raised their hands.

"Hmm," Al murmured. "I could use someone who is forceful. Strong. Responsible. . . ."

"Well, I try to be those things. I'm the oldest," Aquata said doubtfully.

"Perfect!" Al exclaimed. "Our shark tamer, Benchley, has been looking for an assistant ever since the last one lost that finger—"

"No way," Aquata cried, shaking her head.

"The sharks are quite harmless, really. Sweethearts, in fact," Al assured her. "Although they *can* get a little crabby around dinnertime."

"What about me?" Adella asked impatiently.

"I saved the best for last," the ringmaster said. "I need someone who likes to be the center of attention. Someone who's an expert at applying makeup. And she should have a sense of humor."

"Well, that's two out of three, Adella," Andrina teased.

Adella frowned. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

"Why, you'll be one of our clowns, of course."

All the princesses laughed—all, that is, except Adella. "Never!" she cried. "Not in a million trillion years, not for all the sand dollars in the world, will I be a clown!"

"But the clowns are the stars of the circus," Al argued. "They get all the biggest laughs."

"I don't like being laughed at," Adella said. "Forget it. It's not going to happen. I am not clown material."

"How about that time you tripped over your own tail during one of our concerts?" Andrina teased. "That was pretty funny."

"But I don't understand," Al said. "I thought your dream was to become a clown. Your sister said . . ."

"My sister has a big mouth," Adella replied, glaring at Ariel. "Once and for all, I do *not* want to be a clown." She crossed her arms

over her chest. "And that's my final word on the subject."

Just then a group of merpeople swam into one of the side rings and began doing a complicated tumbling routine. "Ah, here is our famous clown troupe now," Al said, pointing a fin at them. "Your Highness, perhaps if you were to watch them practice, you would change your mind about joining them. They're really quite extraordinary. Their talent is renowned throughout the seven seas. They—"

"Who's that?" Adella interrupted, staring intently at one of the clowns.

The other princesses turned to look. "Isn't that the cute boy you ran into before, Adella?" Aquata exclaimed. "The one with the broom?"

"Do you mean Frankton?" Al asked. "Why, he's one of the stars of the troupe."

"Really?" Suddenly Adella looked much less upset than she had a moment earlier. "You know," she said slowly, still staring at Frankton, "I really wouldn't want anything bad to happen to Father on Saturday. I

want to be here for him." She gave a dramatic sigh. "And if that means being a clown for a few days, well, I guess I'll just have to live with it." She turned to Al. "When do I start?"

"Not a word," Adella warned her sisters two days later. "The first one who says anything will be very, very sorry."

It was the first time Adella had tried on the clown costume Al had given her. She was wearing a huge red polka-dotted overcoat, a red bow tie, an orange wig, and a floppy red hat. Her face was covered with white makeup, and her nose was hidden beneath a big red ball.

Adella sat down glumly on the bleachers near the center ring. For a few seconds her sisters tried not to laugh.

Ariel was the first to giggle. It didn't take long for the rest of the girls to join in.

"This is the most humiliating day of my life," Adella cried. "I can't believe I'm doing this, even for a boy!"

"Don't forget the real reason we're here, Adella," Aquata said soothingly. She winked at Andrina. "Besides, I think this new look is the real you."

"This is a complete waste of time," Adella muttered. "We're lying to Father and Sebastian. We're behind on our homework. And I'm swimming around wearing a hideous orange wig and a floppy hat."

"Adella does have a point," Attina admitted. "So far we haven't really accomplished anything."

"Sure we have," Aquata said with a sigh. "Alana trained a dogfish to jump through a hoop made of eels. You've been sawed in half a dozen times. The last time Humphrey and Ariel tried their trick, she actually caught

the trapeze. And I nearly had my head bitten off by Cutie Pie, the shark with the attitude problem."

"Still, this is the third day in a row we'll fib to Sebastian," Attina said guiltily. "I don't know how much longer he's going to believe we're practicing with the girls' spongeball team after school."

"The circus is the day after tomorrow," Ariel reminded her sisters. "We won't have to do this much longer."

Alana sighed. "I feel like a real sea snake, lying so much."

"The worst part is, we haven't found any evidence. Everyone seems perfectly nice," Ariel said. "It's hard to imagine that anyone here could be plotting to overthrow Father."

"I've had my eye on a suspicious clown named Shimmy Shores," Adella said. She adjusted her rubber nose. "There's something about him I don't trust. Every time I look at him, he smiles."

"He's a clown, Adella," Ariel reminded her. "That's his job."

"Maybe we haven't found any evidence because there *isn't* any evidence," Adella said. "I'm beginning to think Father was right about Merseer's prediction."

"Better safe than sorry," Ariel said.

"Easy for you to say," Adella replied. "You don't have to dress up like an idiot."

"Well, I guess I should get back to my sea horses," Arista said, sighing. "I've almost gotten to the point where I can ride bareback doing a handstand, as long as they go *very* slowly!" She turned, then stopped. "Look, over there by the tent opening. Isn't that Merseer?"

They watched as the old merlady swam toward them. She was wearing yellow mittens and a long red dress. "Good afternoon, Your Royalties," she called.

"Merseer," Ariel asked hopefully, "has your pearl told you anything more?"

"Well, yesterday it told me I'd have a bad case of indigestion if I ate that extra helping of sea-fruit pie, and sure enough—" Merseer patted her stomach. "Here it is, right on schedule."

"About our father, I mean," Ariel said.

"As a matter of fact—" Merseer lowered her voice. "That's why I'm here."

"Do you know who the bad guys are?"

Merseer's face clouded. "Oh, no, I still can't figure that one out. This is a new prediction. Hot off the pearl." She cleared her throat. "It goes as follows: *When the soup grows cold, your father will grow hot.*"

"I don't get it," Andrina said.

"Me, neither." Merseer shrugged. "But the pearl never lies." Without another word, she floated off.

"I wish she could learn to speak like everyone else," Adella complained.

Suddenly Aquata slapped her hand to her forehead. "Oh my gosh!" she cried. "Dinner! We're late!"

Adella hurried off to remove her clown makeup and costume. As soon as she was ready, the sisters sped home as fast as they could. When they reached the entrance to the dining hall, the royal court composer, Sebastian, and the King were there, waiting for them.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Ariel whispered to Attina.

The King glared at them, his arms crossed over his chest. "How was your spongeball game, Daughters?" he asked evenly.

"Um, fine," Adella said, clutching at the bag containing her costume. "Just fine."

"And who won?"

"We did?" Ariel replied. It came out sounding more like a question than an answer.

"That must not have been too difficult," the King continued, "since there wasn't another team to compete against."

Ariel gulped. She sneaked a glance at her sisters. They all looked as guilty as she felt.

"Sebastian sent a messenger over to tell you dinner would be a little late because Cook was making a special soup. Unfortunately, the messenger couldn't find you."

Just then something popped out of the bag Adella was clutching and landed on the ground in front of the King—something small and round and red.

"My nose!" Adella cried in horror.

Sebastian reached over and picked it up with his claw, examining it thoughtfully. "But I like the nose you have," he said, frowning.

Triton shook his head. "You've been at that circus again, haven't you, Daughters? You've been lying to Sebastian and me."

Ariel nodded. She felt relieved to tell the truth, even though she could tell her father was very angry that they had lied. "We were so worried about the fortune-teller's prediction, Father," she explained. "We thought if we could find someone who seemed suspicious—"

"I've heard all I want to hear about this prediction. Thanks to this silliness, all the food is cold and Cook's furious. And more important, I've found out I can't trust my own daughters. So now it's *my* turn to tell you the future," the King said, his voice booming. "For the next two days, you girls are grounded. No fun, no nothing. And absolutely no circus."

As the princesses headed dejectedly toward

the dining hall, Alana swam up beside Ariel. "*When the soup grows cold, your father will grow hot*," she whispered.

Ariel nodded. "Merseer was right again," she whispered back. "We've got to save Father—whether he wants us to or not!"

On Saturday afternoon the princesses watched anxiously from an upstairs window as King Triton climbed into his royal coach to depart for the circus.

"The coast is clear," Aquata said as soon as the sea-horse-drawn coach began to pull away. "Everyone ready?"

"Ready as we'll ever be," Alana said nervously. "I feel so guilty, disobeying Father's orders like this."

"What choice do we have?" Ariel asked. "This may be the only way to save his life."

"Where's Sebastian?" Attina whispered as they headed for the hallway.

"In the music room, working on a new song," Arista replied. "He should be occupied for hours."

"Then let's go," Ariel said. "We've got to get to the circus as quickly as we can. I just hope Al got our message yesterday." Ariel had asked Flounder to swim to the circus grounds and tell the ringmaster that they wouldn't be able to make it to the last rehearsal. "Wouldn't it be terrible if he replaced us or something?"

"Yeah, terrible," Adella said. "You know, I think I may be coming down with something." She put her hand to her forehead. "Maybe I should stay home, just to be on the safe side."

Andrina gave her a gentle push. "Adella's got a serious case of clownitis."

"Well, who can blame me," Adella grumbled. "This is worse than sea-ography."

"Come on, Adella. Let's go," Ariel said impatiently. "We're going to be late."

The princesses rushed out to the stables and saddled up seven of the royal sea horses. "But where are you going in such a hurry?" demanded Mackey, the merman in charge of the stables.

"Don't worry," Andrina assured him, winking at Adella. "We're just clowning around."

When the princesses arrived at the circus grounds, they found merpeople from all over the kingdom swimming about excitedly. Many were eagerly waiting in line to get into the big top. Triton's coach was parked outside.

The princesses tied up their sea horses and rushed to the special area for performers at the back of the main tent. "Now, remember," Ariel reminded the others. "Keep an eye on Father every second. Watch out for anyone or anything suspicious."

"There you are! We missed you yesterday," Al cried, rushing toward them with a relieved look on his face. "Your friend told me you'd

be out yesterday, but he didn't warn me you'd be so late today!"

"Sorry about that. We had a little, um, family emergency," Ariel said, glancing at Adella.

"Well, hurry up and get into your costumes, quick, quick, quick!" Al said. "Your father has already arrived."

The princesses quickly put on their costumes. They were beautiful outfits, covered with pearls and spangles and colorful sea jewels. "This is so unfair," Adella moaned as she watched her sisters. "You get pearls, and I get polka dots." Suddenly she perked up. "I have an idea," she said. "Suppose I trade places with one of you?"

"It's too late for that," Aquata said.

"I'll do anything not to have to go out in public like this," Adella moaned. She tugged at Ariel's arm. "Ariel, please! Let me do the blowhole trick with Humphrey. You know how I love whales."

"Since when?" Attina asked.

Adella ignored her. "I'll do anything, Ariel. I'll even do all your homework for a

week. No, a month!" She grabbed Ariel's shoulders. "All right then, a year!"

"It's too late, Adella," Ariel replied, pulling away from her sister's grasp. "Besides, I don't know what you're so worried about. It's not as if anyone will know it's you out there."

"*I'll* know," Adella said grumpily.

The princesses peeked through the tent flap. The King was sitting on a special throne in front of the center ring, surrounded by seven empty seats—where his daughters should have been sitting.

Ariel scanned the crowd carefully. So far, so good. There was no sign of anyone suspicious.

She swam to a corner of the tent where she could watch all the performers. It's a good thing Humphrey and I are the grand finale, she thought. That meant she could keep a watchful eye on the King for most of the show.

A few minutes later a blowfish sounded, and Al swam out to the center ring. "Ladies and gents," he began. "The Circus of the

Sea is proud to present the greatest show in the ocean. And in honor of His Royal Highness, King Triton, I'm pleased to announce that we have some very special friends with us today."

All at once performers swam out into each of the three rings. The clowns were in the center ring. They came riding out in a tiny conch-shell coach that was much too small for all of them. When it reached the center, the coach ran into a clownfish, and the merclowns all piled out. Adella was hovering at one side of the ring, her arms crossed over her chest. But soon the other clowns noticed her. They darted over and began banging her on the head with bats made of soft sea sponge.

Ariel checked her father's face. He was laughing heartily—he didn't seem to recognize Adella.

In the right-hand ring Alana appeared with Clem Bayke, the dogfish trainer. The playful dogfish swam through hoops formed by glowing green eels. Ariel could tell from the King's surprised expression that he had

recognized Alana immediately. For a moment he looked angry. But when Alana coaxed one of the dogfish into swimming upside down, Triton broke into a grudging smile.

His smile turned quickly to shock as his eyes traveled over to the far ring. The Mysterious Manta was there, busily sawing through the long coral box that held Attina. Manta pulled the box apart while Attina waved from one end. Her tail seemed to wiggle at the other end. It was a wonderful trick, and the whole audience, including the King, burst into applause.

Just then someone caught Ariel's eye. Merseer was swimming back and forth, fretfully, near the entrance to the tent. Her brow was knitted, and she was wringing her mittens. It was obvious that the old merwoman was as worried about King Triton as the princesses were.

The crown of the King will be toppled, Ariel thought. A shiver ran down her spine, all the way to the tip of her tail.

The minutes ticked by. Soon it would be Ariel's turn to perform. Humphrey squeezed

his huge body into the tent and gave her a wink. "It's almost time," he said. "Are you worried?"

"No," Ariel replied, gazing at her father.

But the truth was, she had never been so worried in her life.

Ariel wiggled down inside the barnacle launching tube on top of Humphrey's blowhole and waited. She saw King Triton shaking his head as he watched three more of his daughters appear in the rings. Aquata was looking very nervous as she swam into a huge cage with Benchley, the shark tamer. Meanwhile, Andrina was climbing high atop a twirling, floating merperson pyramid. Arista was in the center ring, doing a handstand

on the back of a beautiful golden sea horse.

The band played as all the acts performed in unison. As each moment passed, Ariel grew more and more anxious. Not for her sisters—they were doing fine—but for the King. There wasn't much time left for Merseer's prediction to come true.

"Three rings of daring, danger, and delight," Al announced as he swam slowly back and forth. "And gracing our company, the lovely daughters of King Triton!"

Aquata was getting ready for her final stunt. Benchley directed Cutie Pie, the largest shark, to open his mouth. Aquata smiled nervously at the crowd. Then she picked up a giant toothbrush and began to brush the shark's huge, dagger-sharp teeth.

The audience applauded wildly. King Triton was roaring with laughter. Benchley swam out of the shark cage and bowed low before the King. Aquata set down the toothbrush and followed him out of the cage. As she left, she slammed the cage door behind her.

From her position on top of Humphrey,

Ariel proudly cheered for Aquata. She knew the sharks were supposed to be tame. But with sharks, one never could be too sure.

Suddenly something caught Ariel's eye. The cage door was slowly swinging back open!

"Aquata!" Ariel cried. But it was too late. Cutie Pie slammed through the opening and darted toward the audience.

Arista had seen the shark's escape, too. "Shark!" she screamed. The terror in her voice made her sea horse bolt with a deafening whinny. Instantly all the other sea horses began to panic. They fell out of formation and swam wildly around the ring.

Suddenly Arista's sea horse shot over the low ring and charged at full speed toward King Triton. The other sea horses stampeded behind him.

At the same moment, Cutie Pie began slithering toward the King. His mouth was half-open in an evil grin.

Ariel watched from far across the tent, cold with fear. The shark or the stampeding sea horses—the only question was which one

the panicking crowd had him trapped in his seat.

Ariel heard a cry and recognized Andrina's voice. One of the sea horses had run into the acrobats. The whole pyramid was tottering. Suddenly all the acrobats fell—directly onto Adella and the rest of the clowns, pushing them straight into the path of the oncoming sea horses.

Ariel saw the jumble of acrobats, clowns, and sea horses below her. But it was too late to stop now.

"Look out!" she cried in terror, throwing her hands up in front of her face.

SPLAT! Ariel plowed into Andrina at full speed. Andrina yelped and tumbled through the water, dragging Ariel and most of the acrobats with her. It was like a huge wave that couldn't be stopped.

First the clowns fell on the King. Then the acrobats fell on the clowns. Then the sea horses ran into the acrobats.

The dogfish yelped with excitement and dashed over to join the mess. Cutie Pie took one look at the pile and made a U-turn. He

slunk back into his cage and curled up in the corner.

Slowly, with moans and groans, the pile of merpeople and creatures pulled itself apart. There, at the very bottom, were Ariel and the King.

"Ariel, are you all right?" Triton asked.

"Um, yes," she replied sheepishly. "Are you?"

"The only thing hurt is my dignity," the King grumbled as he helped his daughter up.

Adella dug herself out from the middle of a pile of clowns. "My nose!" she cried in surprise. "It's still attached!"

"Father," Arista demanded, swimming over to him. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Fine," he assured her.

Adella rushed over and gave him a hug. She squeezed him so hard her nose honked loudly. "Er—do I know you?" the King asked.

"It's me—Adella!" she cried.

"I'm sure there's a very not-so-logical explanation for all this, but the most important

thing to me is that you're all okay," King Triton said, smiling at his daughters as they crowded around him.

"Your crown, Father. It's gone," Aquata said suddenly.

Ariel glanced around. She saw a glint of gold half-hidden in the sand. "There it is," she cried, reaching down to retrieve it.

"Ah, my crown," Triton said, placing it on his head. "Wouldn't want to lose that now, would I?"

The seven mermaids exchanged a look. One by one they burst out laughing.

"The crown of the great King Triton will be toppled," Ariel recited. "Merseer was right, after all."

"Of course I was right," said the old merwoman, swimming up to join them. "Told you so."

"But—," Ariel began. "If we hadn't listened to you to begin with, none of this ever would have happened."

"Well, yes. But I was still right, wasn't I, dearie?" Merseer patted her on the arm. "Now, as soon as you're cleaned up here, I

want you all to stop by my tent. I've got some all-new predictions for you."

"Thanks, but no thanks, Merseer," Ariel said with a laugh. "The future can be too surprising."

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The little mermaid princess, Ariel, and her six older sisters–Aquata, Alana, Andrina, Attina, Adella, and Arista–live in a glorious castle deep below the ocean. But growing up in a palace isn't easy...especially with seven teenage mermaids and a strict father all living under one roof!

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